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# The triad model of follower needs: theory and review

Wendy de Waal-Andrews and Mark van Vugt

Humans have an evolved flexible followership psychology that enables them to select different leaders in different contexts, depending on their needs. We distinguish a triad of follower needs: (i) guidance into a shared direction, (ii) active protection against threats, and (iii) judicious dispute settlement. These needs relate to critical group coordination challenges described in biology and anthropology and to different evolutionary leadership theories. We describe the contexts, in which these needs emerge, the characteristics of leaders who meet these needs, and the potential risks of following these leaders. We end by discussing the potential of our theory to aid the understanding of leadership in modern organizations, female leadership, leader manipulation of needs, and individual differences between followers.

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Seemingly unlikely candidates have been swept into political leadership positions in recent years. They include former investment banker Emmanuel Macron who became the youngest president in the history of France [1], American business tycoon and tv personality turned president Donald Trump, and environmental lawyer Zuzana Caputova who emerged as Slovakia's first ever female president despite her lack of political experience [2]. Although surprising choices at first blush, each of these political leaders tapped into an important need of their electorate. In a politically divided France yearning for political change [3], Macron's youth and vow to 'bring together the French people' and 'unblock France' [4] met his voters' need for guidance into a shared new direction [cf. 5]. Increasing anxiety among traditionally high-status Americans, resulting from domestic racial diversity and

globalization, fueled support for Trump in 2016 [6], pointing at the need for a strong leader who could protect citizens from various threats. Finally, amid mass-protests following the murder of a journalist investigating political corruption [2], Caputova's call to 'fight evil' and her track-record as a lawyer met her voters' need for a leader who could settle disputes and bring justice [cf. 7].

These diverse follower needs tie into different adaptive problems faced by our ancestors in the course of human evolution, and that are still evident in both small-scale human societies and non-human societies [8–10]. Guidance into a shared direction is important in group movement, active protection against threats in aggressive between-group conflicts, and judicious dispute settlement in managing intra-group conflict (e.g. food sharing). These needs also align with the three leadership functions ('sorts of power'), distinguished by Montesquieu [11, p. 198], with guidance into a shared direction relating to the power to 'enact, amend or abrogate laws', active protection to the power to 'make peace or war, receive embassies, and establish public security' and judicious dispute settlement to the power to 'punish criminals and determine disputes.' Similar trichotomous distinctions can be found in various leadership theories, most notably functional leadership theory [e.g. 12] (Figure 1).

## Triad model of follower needs

We conceive of leadership as having disproportionate influence on collective behavior and group decision making, thereby ensuring smooth coordination [13–15]. Humans have both an evolved leadership psychology that prompts them to take on a leading role when the opportunity or need to do so arises [9,16] and an evolved followership psychology that enables them to select different leaders in different situations [17]. People are more positive about leaders who meet their needs [18,19,20] and at least three of these needs vary with critical group coordination challenges [21–23]: (i) guidance into a shared direction, (ii) active protection against threats, and (iii) judicious dispute settlement. Here we individually characterize each of these needs and the leaders who are most likely to meet them. However, we note that different needs can be met by a single leader [e.g. ambidextrous leadership: 24], and that, as needs vary across time and people, effective leaders often need to meet different follower needs [cf. 12] (Table 1).

## Guidance into a shared direction

As dispersion can leave individual group members in a vulnerable position, coordinating group movement has important survival benefits for group-living species [25].

Figure 1



Archetypes of follower needs in non-human and human societies. Images reflect leader-follower interactions for (i) non-human societies at the left and (ii) human societies at the right. Archetypes of guiding into a shared direction include: **(a)** African elephants on the move, **(b)** Emmanuel Macron addressing the World Economic Forum. Archetypes of active protection include: **(c)** Protective lioness, **(d)** Donald Trump on campaign trail. Archetypes of judicious conflict resolution include: **(e)** Chimpanzees inspecting an apple held by one, **(f)** Zuzana Caputova in debate (photo credits: a: Max Pixel, b: World Economic Forum/Sikarin Thanachaiary, background cleaned CC BY-NC-SA 2.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/>, d: Gage Skidmore, CC BY-SA 2.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/deed.en>, e: Matthew Hoelscher CC BY-SA 2.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/deed.en>, f: Bubamara CC BY-SA 4.0: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.en>).

Table 1

## Key descriptors per follower need

Follower needs	Guidance into a shared direction	Active protection from external threats	Judicious dispute resolution
Prototypical evolutionary context	Group movement	Between-group conflict	Intra-group conflict resolution and food sharing
Modern societal context	Societal change	War	Crime, conflicts of interest
Modern business context	Organizational change	Competition	Business ethics, conflicts of interest
Related leadership theory	Prestige model and neural capital model	Dominance model	Collective action model
Leader characteristics	Competence, expert knowledge, reputation, persuasiveness, charisma	Strength, coercive dominance, masculine	Impartial, fair, high integrity and strength, power, (prosocial) dominance
Leader motive	Prestige motive	Dominance motive, personalized power motivation	Leadership motive, social power motivation
Moderating factors	Environmental conditions promoting or deterring dispersion	Follower desire to escalate or de-escalate conflict	Equal or unequal hierarchical relationship between parties in dispute
Potential risks versus benefits for followers	Leader seeking popularity versus performance	Exploitation versus protection by leader	Leader partiality/selfishness versus fairness

Consequently, following leaders who can guide a group into a shared direction may have become part of our follower psychology. The need for such a leader may arise when individuals face a novel situation or one with multiple alternatives to choose from. Leaders who demonstrate competence or have expert knowledge can help individuals determine the best course of action [cf. 26]. Moreover, leaders who balance goal-oriented with socially oriented behavior can ensure group dispersion is limited [27], although external threats promoting group cohesion [e.g. predation-risks in shoaling fish: 28] may also achieve this.

Individuals may not only seek a leader whose guidance they are willing to follow, but also one whom they believe *others* will follow. This may explain the importance of non-leaders for mobilizing participants for actions initiated by leaders [e.g. raids: 29]. Moreover, it suggests that reputation, persuasiveness, charisma and prestige may be important qualities for these leaders [30<sup>•</sup>]. Concordantly, prestige models state that leaders emerge as a result of followers' emulating expert models [31, see Ref. 32<sup>••</sup> for a recent review] and that followers bestow prestige on these models in return for access [33]. Hence, leaders who meet followers' need for guidance may also be high in prestige motive, defined as a desire to be admired and respected for one's skills and knowledge [34<sup>••</sup>].

Human and non-human studies confirm the importance of expert guides as leaders. For example, experiments with both fish and humans find that a few knowledgeable individuals are enough to ensure collective movement [27,35]. Moreover, in Bonobos, older females who assumedly have more knowledge of the local environment, are more likely to initiate group movement [36] and a comparative study of mammals found that they follow the lead of more knowledgeable animals in both group travel and collective foraging [10]. In humans, leader prestige motivation reduces the likelihood that followers form coalitions against them [R Ronay] but at the same time makes leaders prioritize personal popularity over effective team performance [37<sup>•</sup>].

#### Active protection from external threats

Over evolutionary history, humans frequently met violent deaths, and a substantial proportion of these deaths are thought to have resulted from intergroup conflict [38,39]. A leader who could effectively lead the defense against threatening outgroups and protect followers from such threats increased their survival, making following such leaders a likely part of human follower psychology. The dominance model of leadership advances superior fighting ability, forceful dominance, aggression and being male as important predictors of leadership [see Ref. 32<sup>••</sup>], and such characteristics typify leaders who actively protect followers in the face of external threats. When given the opportunity, such leaders sometimes use preemptive aggression to avoid harm to their group [40]. They are presumably high in

dominance and personalized power motivation, traits that are associated with conflict escalation [41].

In line with this, several studies have found that priming people with intergroup conflict (e.g. voting for a war-time president) increases preferences for male leaders [15] and leaders with relatively masculine faces [21,22], but followers' preferred reaction to threats may moderate their preferences. For example, people prefer a feminine-looking leader when conflicts need to be de-escalated [30<sup>•</sup>]. Moreover, experiencing 'fight emotions' (i.e. anger, hatred) was associated with a higher preference for dominant leaders in people threatened by geopolitical conflict [42]. In competitive business settings people prefer physically strong males as group representatives [43]. Economic threats (like poverty and unemployment) also increase the preference for dominant leaders, perhaps because of voters' perceptions that tough, protective measures are needed [44,45]. This may imply that the need for active protection is part of a broader set of evolved systems selected to minimize threats to reproductive fitness [e.g. disease avoidance: 46].

#### Judicious dispute settlement

Conflicts of interest are inherent to group living and can lead to internal divisions which undermine the cohesiveness of a group [47]. The ability to use potentially lethal tools and the propensity to retaliate the deaths of next-off-kin [48] may have further exacerbated the need to reduce within-group violence in early humans. Humans, like other primates, have evolved mechanisms to resolve within-group disputes [47; cf. collective action model of leadership: 49]. Research suggests that powerful individuals (e.g. alphas) are more likely to intervene in intragroup conflict [50] and such interventions reduce conflict-escalation in both primates [51] and humans [52]. The relative paucity of such interventions explains why disputes can quickly result in homicide in egalitarian human societies that lack strong leadership [48].

To effectively settle disputes, leaders must be honest, impartial and fair, and may be high in social power orientation (as opposed to personal power orientation), a trait that is related to making decisions that serve the common good [41]. This may explain why voters are quick to notice when politicians make self-interested decisions [53,54]. To effectively settle disputes, leaders may also need to be strong or dominant to ensure their decisions will be abided by. However, dominant leaders can meet resistance or retaliation, especially when appearing harsh or self-serving [48], and they may avoid confrontations that carry that risk. For example, experimental research found that members of groups facing the risk of 'horizontal exploitation' (e.g. criminal behavior or freeriding) prefer a more dominant-looking leader, but this preference is reversed in groups facing a 'vertical exploitation' risk, that is, exploitative behavior by leaders [24]. A study among Bolivian



forager-farmers found that men whereas men intervened more in conflicts of an economic nature (e.g. disputes of property, debts, and theft) women did so more in conflicts of a personal nature [negligence of children and animals, sexual affairs: 55\*\*], suggesting that men avoided intervening in such sensitive issues. Moreover, a study of conversations among the !Kung of the Kalahari desert found that criticism of others was more likely to be voiced by both men and women who were respected in the community and well-connected, but harsh criticism was delivered mostly by women. Moreover, men refrained from voicing criticism themselves in issues that might incite conflict and instead encouraged female relatives to intervene [56].

### Outstanding questions

Our brief review of the psychological, anthropological and biological literature shows the validity of the triad model of follower needs with multiple implications for leader emergence and group effectiveness. More research is needed to understand the implications in contemporary organizations (like businesses), in which leader positions are formalized and relatively stable. For instance, when higher-level managers select team leaders instead of the subordinates who report to these leaders [W De Waal-Andrews], followers' needs may remain unmet. How this affects leader-follower relations in the workplace, and how this is qualified by the personalities and psychologies of followers and leaders remains to be seen. For instance, anxious workers may want to seek protection from their manager, whereas confident and curious workers may want a manager they can learn from. Individual differences in agreeableness, conscientiousness, and honesty-humility may be related to difference in the prestige and power motivations of leaders.

Additional questions relate to female leaders. Given that men are on average taller, stronger and higher in fighting ability than women they will be more likely to emerge as dominant leaders in reaction to the need for active protection [cf. 32\*\*]. In contrast, both observations of our closest primate relatives [47] and experimental research in humans [15] suggest that females may be more likely than males to emerge as leaders in situations requiring judicious dispute settlement [see also Ref. 56, but see Ref. 55\*\*]. Decreasing differences between men and women in education level and work participation [57] suggest that both sexes may emerge as prestige-based leaders in situations requiring guidance in a shared direction. Exploring the nature and potential cultural malleability of these perceptions may prove insightful for the promotion of women to top leadership positions.

Relatedly, men and women may have different needs as followers. A compensatory model would argue that followers seek out leaders to fulfill needs they cannot meet themselves. Thus, the need for leaders who can provide

active protection may be higher in women than in men. However, a matching needs model could also be possible. People may prefer leaders that align more closely with their own needs [e.g. more formidable men are more supportive of war: 58], seek out such situations, and, when not attaining a leadership role, feel a higher need for leaders who can manage such situations.

An interesting question relates to the ability of leaders to manipulate followers' needs. Leaders may seek to frame situations such that the needs of followers match the type of leadership they have to offer [cf. 59] and the complexity of contemporary organizations may provide the leeway to do so [cf. mismatch 60]. How successful such framing attempts are and whether it is easier for some needs (an external threat) than for others remains to be seen.

Finally, impactful events can have enduring effects on follower needs. For example, people who grow up in harsh environments later prefer dominant leaders who can protect them from external threats [45]. Thus, the three needs identified in this review may vary across both individuals and across contexts. Developing a measure to assess individual differences in follower needs may be a fruitful avenue for future research.

### Concluding comments

Given the different leadership qualities associated with each follower need, any one leader may struggle to meet multiple needs. Attempting to meet these diverse needs may be one reason why the ratings of political leaders drop once they are in office [61]. For example, Trump's protectionist stance proved successful in getting him elected, but he struggles to garner the necessary support to bring about real change as he continues to suffer from attacks on his integrity and fairness. Macron was highly effective in rallying support to lead France into a new political and economic direction, but his popularity suffered from being caught up in internal disputes around the 'movement des gilets jaunes'. It may be early to say how Caputova will fare. Yet the lesson is that followers have multiple needs and they judge their leaders according to how well they meet all those needs.

### Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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